Theme and Variation

Posted originally on the Archive of Our Own at http://archiveofourown.org/works/7013509.

Rating:	Teen And Up Audiences
Archive Warning:	No Archive Warnings Apply
Category:	M/M
Fandoms:	Hannibal (TV), Hannibal Lecter Series - All Media Types
Relationships:	Will Graham/Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham & Abigail Hobbs, Abigail Hobbs & Hannibal Lecter
Characters:	Hannibal Lecter, Will Graham, Abigail Hobbs, Freddie Lounds, Beverly Katz, Franklyn Froideveaux
Additional Tags:	Musicians, Alternate Universe - Classical Music, music teachers, Piano, Hannibal and Will meet under very different circumstances, Hannibal is Not a Cannibal, Take Your Fandom to Work Day
Language:	English
Collections:	out and about
Stats:	Published: 2016-05-29 Completed: 2016-06-01 Words: 10,551 Chapters: 3/3

Theme and Variation

by Magical_Destiny

Summary

Dr. Hannibal Lecter is composing what very well could be his magnum opus. Or he would be, if not for the distractions of the small music school where he'd taken a position out of sheer practicality. Between underachieving students, scathing reviews of his existing compositions, and the unwanted pursuit of the discourteous music publisher Freddie Lounds, Hannibal is all but certain that Fate itself is against his composition ever being finished to his satisfaction. Worst of all, for the first time in his memory, he feels uninspired.

The final nail in his coffin is the new piano teacher who takes up the vacant studio beside his own, invading Hannibal's precious isolation. A former performer, long since fallen from the heights of fame…by the name of Will Graham.

Music teacher/musician AU, written for Take Your Fandom to Work Day on Tumblr.

Notes

I came across the Take Your Fandom to Work Day challenge on Tumblr and thought to myself, "Hannibal and Will as piano teachers, hahaha…"

But then I realized.

Their personalities and relationship could actually be translated into a musical setting. It's not even a stretch. Hannibal is already a composer, and he plays the harpsichord *and* the piano and he talked about wanting to teach Abigail. And Will has a piano in his house. That piano has always made me feel a slightly obsessive urge to headcanon Will as someone with at least a little music in his background. So when this challenge came along, offering me the chance to make Will into a musician, I jumped on it.

There will be about three chapters of this, and I'm working hard to get them all edited and published by the challenge deadline of June 1st. So there won't be long to wait!

One last note: this challenge is about inserting characters you love into your own job, but don't worry, this is not a piano teacher!fic so much as it's a chance to transpose the Hannibal/Will dynamic into a new key. A variation on a theme, if you will. What changes when the setting of their relationship is altered? And what stays exactly the same? Also, how many times can I quote/reference the show and have cameos? Let's find out. ;)

See the end of the work for more notes

- Translation into Русский available: Тема и вариация by Setchi

Chapter 1

The melody surfaced in his mind long before Hannibal committed the first notes to paper. He thought perhaps it had come to him in a dream. He'd certainly woken with the melody hovering just out of reach.

It coalesced as he showered and dressed, selecting a suit despite the studio's disappointing lack of dress code. He could almost hum the first phrase as he lingered over breakfast. The radio remained silent for the whole length of his drive into downtown Baltimore to prevent any foreign influence from corrupting the almost-music in his mind.

He experimented with orchestrations almost before the melody itself was sculpted from his teeming thoughts. Horns and strings, flutters of flute, perhaps…

Piano, he realized as he at last hummed a complete phrase, full of sighing figures descending further and further into melancholy. A piano concerto.

He parked along the sidewalk and approached the aged two-story building. A single glass door waited beneath the *Musical Minds* sign that glowed softly at night and looked weatherbeaten by day. He glared half-heartedly at the old sign as he walked beneath it, wondering whether voicing his dissatisfaction to the owner — *again* — would produce any effect. Working in a less than pristine environment would lower the morale of the aspiring musicians who walked through these doors. It certainly did Hannibal no favors.

As if responding to the drift of Hannibal's thoughts, the portrait of Jack Crawford, owner of the Musical Minds Academy of Music, smirked at him across the cramped foyer, one incredulous eyebrow raised.

So don't work here, Jack's voice said in the quiet of his mind, echoing their many conversations on the topic of what was and was not suitable atmosphere for the study and composition of music. Jack seemed to give a greater weight of importance to practicality than to art. Of course, Jack *was* a tuba player.

He was also a businessman, first and foremost. He wanted Hannibal to stay; having a former conservatory teacher on the staff looked very impressive, even if Hannibal mostly refused the students Jack tried to offer him. He wasn't here to slog through hours of lessons each day, trying to coax art and beauty from students, like a man squeezing water from rocks. If he'd wanted that, he would have stayed safely in the world of conservatories, where he could be a taciturn tyrant and work with a superior class of student performer. But he'd descended that particular mountain and plunged back into the valley of middling music education. All so he could have more time to compose.

So Hannibal averted his eyes from the wallpaper that was starting to peel away from the ancient wooden paneling. He also pointedly ignored the trail of anthropomorphic notes smiling and uttering nonsense in large-lettered speech bubbles leading the way to the preschool music classes. He followed the hallway that branched off to the right instead, climbing a constrictive staircase that led to a far corner of the second floor.

His private studio was spotless and silent, separated from the other teaching studios by an empty studio, a rarely-used classroom, and a wide expanse of hallway. A remote teaching space had been the first of his conditions when he'd agreed to employment at Jack's studio. The second condition was the old Steinway baby grand piano that he had tuned and cared for himself since arriving. It all but dominated the studio when he unlocked and opened his door, even with the lid lowered. His compositions in progress were arranged neatly across the desk under the single window, the early morning light spilling across the penciled noteheads that danced over the staves. No titles marred any of the opening pages, only precise opus numbers. A thin, leather-bound notebook with notes on his handful of students was lined up with one corner of the desk.

He breathed the slightly dusty scent of the old books and scores arranged on his wall-to-wall shelves, and smiled at the warm and welcoming silence. Resting his briefcase carefully by the desk, he widened the gap in the curtains until the sun was free to slide across the piano and pulled a sheaf of blank staff paper from his desk. He lifted the lid, arranged himself on the padded bench, spread the paper on the piano before him, and closed his eyes. After a moment, he tilted his head and began to coax the melody from the keys in front of him.

There it was.

His eyes snapped open, a tight smile puling at his face. He scratched away at the blank page, notes spilling easily from his pencil.

This piece had no title either.

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"Did you look at the composition I sent you?"

Hannibal studied the nearly blank page of his notebook for much longer than necessary, as if considering something he'd written. The only sentence he *had* written was: *Refer immediately.* That had been weeks ago, and Jack was still claiming no other teachers had space in their schedule for a transfer student. He sighed, considered adding the words *aggressively untalented despite obsessive practice*, decided against such pettiness, and finally met the eyes of his student over the edge of his notebook. Franklyn Froideveaux, fresh off an undergraduate music degree and eager to try his hand at composing and possibly graduate school, watched him hopefully from the piano.

"I have not had the time to look at in any depth," he said, truthfully. He didn't mention that he'd taken one look at the email subject line, "Anxiety: A Neurosis for Piano," and closed out of his email account in disgust.

Franklyn's crestfallen look was almost as grating as his usual overeagerness.

"Well," Franklyn started, sliding his scores into his briefcase, "Let me know when you do. I would love to hear your thoughts. This piece…it was inspired by you, actually."

Hannibal thought it best to let that statement dangle. He pushed past it, murmured, "I'll see you next week, Franklyn," and breathed a sigh of relief when his final student of the day

closed the door behind him. Blessed silence, at last. Close enough, at any rate; there was the distant sound of a Chopin Nocturne bleeding through the sound dampened walls from somewhere nearby. Beautiful tone, Hannibal thought distantly, and tuned it out.

The sun had long since set, and the sounds and smells of the city were seeping through the crack he'd left between the window and the pane. The ancient climate control was another thing he needed to insist that Jack take care of. The studio was always stuffy, no matter the season.

Hannibal closed his notebook and aligned it carefully with the corner of his desk, reaching for his tablet instead. He might as well get Franklyn's composition out of the way. Maybe he'd send a snippy email to Jack about the air conditioning and the necessity of transferring Franklyn while he was at it. Feeling a little cheered at the prospect, he opened his inbox and scanned the queue of new emails.

Franklyn's misguided attempt at composition was buried beneath an email from Jack, which he opened immediately, and one from Freddie Lounds, which he did not. Jack's message turned out to be a mass email to all the staff. Something about a new teacher and making him feel welcome.

Hannibal lost interest and didn't finish reading.

He only made it through the subject line of Ms. Lounds' email.

$$$, it read.

Always the embodiment of taste, he thought in disgust, and deleted it. He'd made the mistake of selling an orchestral suite to Ms. Lounds and her publishing house once, and ended up with a collection of his music that had been given garish titles instead of the simple opus numbers he habitually applied.

Never again.

Hannibal leaned back in his chair, studying the rows of ceiling tiles broken up by rectangular fluorescent lights, and tried to chase that elusive melody from the morning. There was a second section, he was sure, and he could almost hear it. Like a mirror image of the first…

His eyes drifted shut.

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He couldn't see the audience. Couldn't feel his feet against the floor or hear the applause that roared between each piece he played. All he felt was the clammy slide of sweat against his temple, the muffled thump, thump, thump of his pulse beneath his collar. He was burning with heat by the time he stood up to take a final bow. A byproduct of the blinding stage lights of the concert hall, surely. The same light gleamed against his shoes when he bowed, beads of sweat dripping from his nose to splash against their polished surface.

And then came the sudden and absolute darkness. He thought someone screamed.

“Call an ambulance!” he heard from somewhere far away and out of reach.

So it wasn’t the stage lights after all.

Will startled awake, gasping like a man deprived of oxygen. It took him a few determined blinks and a focused effort of concentration, but he at last recognized the studio space Jack had led him to an hour or so earlier. There were two pianos, a black Boston upright and a Kawai cherrywood grand; a collection of empty shelves lining one wall; an uncurtained window over the desk he’d already cluttered, overlooking the darkened Baltimore cityscape. The room seemed uncomfortably bright in comparison.

Will groaned and stretched the stiffness from his spine. He caught a glimpse of himself in the mirror that covered a long expanse of the wall beside his desk and groaned again. Shadows under his eyes, hair ruffled out of any sort of professional neatness — he looked as tired as he felt. Dammit.

He reached for the paper cup of coffee he’d brought in with him, long cold now, and knocked it back anyway, hoping for a quick infusion of caffeine. He had to make it through one lesson this evening and then he could drive home, let the dogs out for a run, and they could all go to sleep. It sounded heavenly. He imagined the glow of the house from the field beyond it and stifled his sigh. He couldn’t be a hermit forever, no matter how much he wanted to be. He had to rejoin the world, he reminded himself. Meet people. Do things. It was part of his recovery, or so the doctors told him.

It was practical, too. He was dangerously close to depleting his savings, and teaching would help make ends meet.

Those who can’t, teach, his mind supplied helpfully. Will sighed and reached for his glasses. Chopin supported himself through teaching, he reminded himself, and decided not to notice how hard he was straining for self-justification. He pulled a creased and beaten copy of Chopin’s Nocturnes from the stack of scores on his desk, shoved his glasses into place, and dropped himself onto the hard bench in front of the grand piano. Melancholy was nothing a little Chopin couldn’t cure.

He thumbed through the ancient pages and tried not to think of Chopin alone in a Parisian apartment, expiring of consumption. He’d been only thirty-nine years old.

An age, Will reflected absently, that he himself was rapidly approaching.

He grimaced and settled on a soothing Nocturne in D Flat Major.

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The Nocturne was faint enough that Hannibal wasn’t distracted from his own thoughts, although he did register the moment when the singing tones of Chopin melted into silence.

And then there was an eruption.

Hannibal's eyes snapped open. He recognized the brutal, savage power of the bass line, the floating melody that appeared in snatches high above. The relentless struggle and chase between the two. Someone was playing one of *his* pieces. He crossed the room without thought, pulling open the door. Without the noise-canceling wall paneling, the sounds had a traceable source instead of seeming to emanate from all around. He followed the trail of crashing notes to the door beside his own.

The empty studio. Formerly empty, it seemed. Jack's email about a new teacher danced through his mind, chased away by a sudden onslaught of memory.

Barbaric, he heard in Bedelia's icy tone. *Off-putting. Violent in its emotional extremes, which only makes the interludes of glassy calm more bizarre.*

That had been her assessment of this particular piece when it had debuted as part of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra's Contemporary Music Festival. He'd composed under a pseudonym, as he almost always did, so she'd never known that she was disemboweling the composer to his face. Her own former student.

He wondered why he could never seem to forget her words.

Hannibal's piece ended with sudden violence, the unseen performer within managing the perfect balance of haunted melancholy and pure savagery. The new teacher, Hannibal reminded himself. A teacher with excellent taste, it would seem. What was his name?

His eyes fell on the empty nameplate beside the door. Over the blank expanse of wall, a slip of paper had been taped into place. In pencil was written *Will Graham.*

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Will's hand hovered over the keys as he all but panted from the exertion of playing. The savage octave passages at the end of this piece were no joke. He felt trembly and tired after the sustained speed and effort of the piece, but his blood hummed under his skin, a pleasant splash of adrenaline that was far more effective than the coffee. This piece, five pages of chaos and violence, titled only Op. 42, was as nightmarish and compelling as all of C.P. Pariah's works. It was a crime that the composer wasn't more popular or better reviewed.

He pulled his well-worn copy of *Blood and Breath: Works for Piano* from his stack of scores and wondered whether the student he was waiting on would play at an advanced enough level to attempt it. Of course, even if they *could* play it, they might not care for the style. It was an acquired taste for most people.

Will came by it naturally. Ever since he'd been introduced to C.P. Pariah's work, years ago, back in his conservatory days, he'd always wanted to meet the reclusive composer that no one seemed to know.

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Hannibal waited several long seconds to be sure he wasn't interrupting. When silence stretched on both sides of the door, he lifted a hand and knocked. There was a rustle of

papers, the creak of a bench, and finally shuffling steps approached. The door opened.

Will Graham blinked at him. “You’re not my student,” he said, possibly aiming for humor. The attempt missed and plummeted into something pained. His smile also fell shy of the mark and ended up as more of a half-hearted grimace.

“Mr. Graham?” Hannibal asked, and waited for Will to nod. “Hannibal Lecter. From the studio next door.”

“Oh. Nice to meet you,” Will answered, shaking his hand, but not quite meeting his eyes. The lack of eye contact wasn’t the strangest thing about Will Graham. He was beautiful, for one thing, even as indifferent to inaudible beauty as Hannibal could occasionally be. Brown hair just long enough to curl, and large green eyes that were mostly hidden behind a pair of glasses and a refusal to maintain eye contact. A defined jawline that was strong and delicate at once, the muscles ticking there in muted stress. He was dressed half-professionally in a button-up and suit jacket, but the slacks and shoes and lack of tie showed a proclivity for comfort over style. He looked uncomfortable, regardless.

Will stepped backward to allow Hannibal inside, a thoughtless motion born of ingrained politeness, Hannibal was sure. Particularly when Will instantly looked as though he regretted letting him breach the doorway.

“So, ah,” Will started, somewhat inauspiciously. “Have you taught here long?”

“A few weeks,” Hannibal answered, scanning the studio. It was barely decorated — just a photo of a large pack of dogs on the desk, a messy stack of piano scores, and a beaten notebook with a pen hooked over the cover. “I was the newest addition before your arrival. The music you were just playing,” he changed topics abruptly, cushioning the bumpy transition with a smooth tone, “I don’t usually hear the works of C.P. Pariah inside these walls.”

Or outside them, for that matter.

Will blinked and his eyes flicked up to Hannibal’s for a full second before he gave a tired smile. “I’m a fan. You like his work too?”

“I do,” Hannibal answered, quite truthfully. “He has a unique voice among contemporary composers.”

“That’s an understatement,” said Will. “I’d say there’s nobody else like him in any era.”

Hannibal was grateful when Will turned away to shuffle papers on his desk; it gave him the opportunity to indulge a gratified smile.

“I don’t guess you’ve ever met him?” Will asked over his shoulder.

Hannibal tilted his head, weighing his words. “We’ve never been introduced.”

“Nobody seems to have met him,” Will sighed. “I’m starting to think he’s a ghost.” He dropped into his desk chair and turned to face Hannibal. “What do you teach?”

“Piano. A bit of composition.”

Will nodded. “Just piano for me. Composition isn’t my area of expertise.”

“You are a performer, then?”

“Was. Was a performer. Now I’m good and retired from the stage.” There was something buried in that statement, judging by the flicker of shadow behind Will’s eyes. But Will pushed past it and offered a smile that was only mildly false. “Waiting on a student now, actually.”

“In that case, I won’t keep you,” Hannibal said, extending his hand to Will a second time. Will stood up to shake it.

“Thanks for the welcome.”

“Thank you for playing Pariah. I don’t believe I’ll mind having you for a studio neighbor. You have no trouble with taste.”

Will laughed at that. “Don’t speak too soon. Jack is going to send a lot of young students my way, or so I hear. You might change your mind the millionth time you hear *Mary Had a Little Lamb*.”

Hannibal was dangerously close to shuddering when a soft knock sounded on the open door behind them. A willowy teenage girl waited in the doorway. Hannibal dismissed the superfluous details of her appearance — the straight dark hair, pale and freckled skin, liquid blue eyes — and focused instead on the relevant ones. Neat, conservative clothing, a faraway look, a few scores tucked under one arm. She had both volumes of the Schirmer urtext edition of Beethoven’s sonatas.

An aspiring music major, then.

“Mr. Graham?” she asked, her eyes sliding uncertainly between the two of them.

“That would be me,” Will answered. “You must be Abigail. Come in, please.” Abigail drifted toward the piano, her piercing eyes studying the room as thoroughly as Hannibal’s had. “Good to meet you,” Will said to Hannibal, walking him to the door.

“Oh no,” Hannibal answered. “The pleasure was all mine.”

The door closed on Will and Abigail, and Hannibal again marveled at the incongruity of Will Graham in a piano studio. He was a painting in a mismatched frame. A man who looked like he’d rather be anywhere else.

Hannibal wondered what the proper setting would be.

Chapter 2

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

The first time Hannibal heard the music, it was a mystery to him. He didn't recognize the notes or the style, but the free-flowing harmonies made him certain it was a modern work. Franklyn came for a later lesson than usual, and Hannibal listened to him with only half an ear, listening for the striking sounds coming, he was almost sure, from Will's studio.

He'd all but decided to knock on Will's door to inquire about the mysterious piece, but by the time Franklyn left, the intriguing music had given way to Beethoven's Appassionata and the moment for questions had passed. Will was likely giving a lesson, and he couldn't interrupt. It would be unforgivably rude.

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The following evening, Will appeared at Hannibal's open door with a hesitant knock. He wore a loose-fitting faded blue button-up today, the sleeves rolled up almost to the elbows. The color pulled the latent tones from his eyes until they seemed far more blue than green.

"May I come in?"

"Please," Hannibal beckoned, indicating an open chair beside the grand piano. Will sat, looking as though keeping still was an effort. He radiated nervous energy as a habit, it would seem. Hannibal noted the splash of dried mud on Will's shoe when he crossed his legs, and wondered where he lived that he came into such intimate contact with nature. The photo of several dogs in a field slotted into place in his mind, and Hannibal tried the new image: Will, far from the bustle of Baltimore, surrounded by dogs. The image rang true, he thought.

"My new student," Will was saying when Hannibal remembered to listen. "Abigail. She wants to compose. I thought I'd recommend that she study with you, if you have the time." Will grimaced and rubbed at the back of his neck with one restless hand. "And if you want to take her on. She's really very talented. Overwhelmingly so, actually. I'm almost not sure what to do with her."

Hannibal detected a fascinating hint of self-doubt and inadequacy in Will's digression, very unusual for a professional pianist. He resisted the urge to poke at the obviously tender area, and reached for more businesslike questions instead.

"Was it her composition I heard last night?" The strange, beguiling music lilted through his mind like a faint echo.

Will nodded. "Last night you would have heard Beethoven and Abigail, yes."

"Impressive work," Hannibal allowed. His decision came quickly. "Very well. You may refer her to me, if you like."

Will looked relieved. “Great,” he said, dropping his hands into his lap. “Thanks.”

Hannibal jotted a note about contacting Abigail into his notebook. “Will she continue her studies with you?” he asked without looking up. “She should, if she has any designs on being a performer.”

“We’ll see, I guess. Sometimes it all comes down to money. I’m not sure about her family’s financial situation, but two sets of lessons may be a strain.” There was something tired in Will’s voice, and Hannibal wondered whether he’d been a charity student himself. The thought caused a strange twinge inside his chest, a sympathetic vibration to the note Will had just struck. Hannibal had completed many of his own studies through scholarships, but he remembered the first few lessons he’d received. Charity from a woman who came to play the piano at the orphanage so many, many years ago.

It was preposterous that music, the highest of arts, could be hemmed in by something as petty as money. If Abigail couldn’t afford two teachers, then perhaps they could all come to an alternative arrangement. Perhaps some level of charity or scholarship could be applied. He closed his notebook, and placed it back on the desk, dismissing those thoughts for a more relevant time.

“If she studies with us both,” he said, folding his hands together, “we should collaborate on the trajectory of her study. Make absolutely certain she can accomplish her goals.”

“That sounds good,” Will nodded. “I’ll write down her contact information for you.” He stood uncertainly, and Hannibal waved him over to the desk, flipping his notebook open and passing him a pen. Will leaned down to scrawl a phone number on the blank page. He smelled of freshly cut grass and cheap aftershave. Hannibal again saw the open field with the dogs, only this time he added a small house to the image, the unfortunate aftershave on the sink. Something with a ship on the bottle.

Will’s fingers tightened suddenly on the pen. “Wait. Do you have…you *do*…” He trailed off entirely, nodding at the stack of scores on the desk, his eyes wide. “Pariah’s work. You have *all* of it.”

“Not all,” Hannibal corrected in amusement. “Not yet. He’s still active, you know.”

“Not active enough,” Will lamented. “He hasn’t published in almost a year. I was there, when his last piece premiered. That hack Du Maurier wrote such an ugly review. I almost wrote her an angry letter about it.”

Will’s eyes were far away, his jaw ticking in compressed anger. Hannibal was transfixed.

“And what would you have said?” he asked quietly.

“That she wouldn’t know true expression if it bit her in the ass.” Will blinked, surprised at himself, Hannibal thought, and grinned sheepishly. “I don’t like Bedelia Du Maurier’s reviews,” he said with a shrug, and stood, casting one last longing glance at the scores.

“I gathered as much,” Hannibal answered, mild as he could manage when his cheeks ached with the effort of not surrendering to a pleased smile. “She is an accomplished composer in her own right, of course. But I must agree that she is —“ he cast about for the right word for his ice-cold teacher. “— limited in her scope. Passion is beyond her ken.”

“You’ve got that right. She misses all of Pariah’s passion. Treats it like it doesn’t matter, and gets caught up in form and construction. But sometimes passion is *all* that matters. Mood. Emotion. Sorry,” he ended with a sudden flush. “I get carried away.”

If this was getting carried away, Hannibal wished that more people would follow Will’s example.

“You may borrow the scores, if you like,” he said before he had a chance to doubt himself. “For however long you would like to keep them.”

“Oh no,” Will protested immediately, but Hannibal didn’t miss the gleam of longing in his eyes. “I couldn’t. Besides, I might never give them back.”

“I’ll take that risk. Please, Will. Play or study as you like — it’s what they’re meant for, after all.”

Will’s resolve crumbled like a house built on no foundation at all. “All right,” he muttered, reaching for the stack of scores like they might burn him. “But if you need any of them, tell me and I’ll give them back immediately.” He touched the stack with reverence, and lifted the cover of the topmost book — a collection of madrigals from Hannibal’s period of Renaissance fascination.

“Is this yours?” Will asked suddenly. Hannibal wondered for a single moment if his life under the pseudonym Pariah was over.

And then Will lifted a sheet of staff paper that had been tucked under the cover.

“Yes,” Hannibal answered, outwardly unruffled. “A new work, not yet complete. Perhaps I’ll play it for you when it is,” he added without knowing why.

“I’d love that,” Will answered, and his smile, for once, wasn’t even fractionally forced. He laid the staff paper on the desk and gathered up the stack of scores. “Thanks for this,” he said, lifting the books before tucking them against his chest. “I appreciate it more than you know.” He paused in the doorway, flashing another genuine grin. “Not sure you’ll appreciate it, though. I’ll probably be playing through these at all hours.”

And with that, he disappeared. True to his word, Will started in on the scores almost the moment he entered his studio, the sounds bleeding through the wall separating the two of them.

On the other side of that veil, Hannibal smiled.

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The next day, Abigail materialized in Hannibal's open doorway. "Mr. Lecter?" she asked, a quiet voice, but not a timid one. "Or is it Doctor?"

"Dr. Lecter," he replied, setting aside his pencil and paper. The notes hadn't been flowing anyway. "Please come in."

"Will told me that you'd be willing to work with me on composition. I stopped by to pick up some music from him, and your door was open…do you have a minute?" Abigail was very controlled for one so young. She would seem as still and cold as a porcelain doll were it not for the intensity of her blue-eyed gaze. Hannibal was curious about what melodies and monstrosities might lurk behind those eyes.

"I do," he confirmed, gesturing toward the piano bench. Abigail sat, gathering her hands to rest in her lap. It was Hannibal's standard practice to interview new students about their prior musical instruction and experience, but in this case, he found himself tempted to skip past the mundanities and reach for the music. "Do you have any compositions you'd like to show me?"

Abigail nodded silently, her expression tightly blank. Whether from nerves or excitement, he couldn't tell. She turned herself toward the polished grand piano, lifted her hands gracefully to the keys — and *attacked* them. Her percussive pounding was distinctly reminiscent of Bartók, even interspersed with thorny snatches of melody that sang out whenever the intensity relented.

It also reminded Hannibal of his own compositions, when he was in a particularly violent mood.

Abigail's stillness had been replaced by a lithe grace as her hands leapt across the keys. Her face softened and furrowed in turn; her concentration was absolute. She pulled a massive series of chords from the piano, the overwhelming volume belying her petite hands, and froze with her hands hovering over the keys. She took a long breath and lowered them into her lap. When she looked over her shoulder at him, she was porcelain again.

Hannibal blinked.

"Well," she asked flatly. "What do you think?"

"I think you are in need of a teacher," he began, watching with interest when her porcelain face cracked at the possible insinuation of inadequacy. But that was not his intended meaning. "Because you have a great deal of talent."

Abigail almost glowed, smiling for the first time since appearing in the doorway. "I'm glad you think so," she replied. "I think so, too."

Hannibal mirrored her smile. Confidence without pretension was rare and precious. He moved into the chair situated at an angle to the piano, so he could see both Abigail and the keys clearly.

“Your chord progression,” he began without preamble, “it’s unusual. Do you plan on resolving any of these phrases? Or perhaps you'd like to lead the listener through purgatory forever.” He didn’t disapprove, necessarily. He was merely curious. Choices were infinite in music, and all rules of function and form could be broken, violently if necessary. But intent was everything.

Abigail listened carefully, her silence focused and sharp at the edges. She shrugged delicately before she spoke. “I haven't decided yet.”

“Indecision can be perilous in acts of creation. There is a fine line between freedom of intent and chaos. Tell me, if you are unsure of your ultimate goal, why did you write it this way?”

Abigail bit her lip, her bright eyes going cloudy and distant as she delved into something behind them. She blinked and looked at Hannibal instead of through him.

“Because it sounds like blood tastes,” she answered quietly.

Hannibal knew all at once that Abigail Hobbs was just the sort of student he’d been looking for. He leaned forward, his smile entirely genuine and almost beyond his control.

“Atta girl.”

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“Abigail seems to be enjoying her lessons with you,” Will observed from his seat beside Hannibal’s Steinway. It was only their second official meeting concerning their mutual student, although Will stopped by Hannibal’s studio quite often to discuss Pariah or complain about Jack’s studio policies, and Hannibal couldn’t resist knocking on Will’s door to inquire about the various pieces Will played between lessons. It was a reliable exchange; they spoke on almost a daily basis.

“I’m certainly enjoying teaching her. Thank you for sending her my way.”

Will nodded, and sipped at his travel mug of coffee, his knee bouncing absently. “I’ll need to arrange some performance opportunities for her. She wants to audition for schools in the spring, so we’ll need to focus on building up the right kind of repertoire.”

“Of course,” Hannibal agreed. “I’ll help her compile a composition portfolio in the event that she wants to pursue a degree in composition. As for the performances, there are informal studio recitals, but nothing of the caliber you’ll need. I would suggest arranging a solo recital for her. I can suggest a few possible venues. Unless,” Hannibal paused, an idea blossoming bright in his mind.

“Yes?” Will prompted, his eyes wandering toward the small plate of fruit and cheese on Hannibal’s desk. It occurred to Hannibal that he never saw Will consume anything besides water and coffee.

“Unless you would like to perform as well. I could premiere my latest works. A true group effort.”

Will had gone alarmingly pale. “That’s not —“ was all he managed to say before his throat seemed to constrict of its own accord.

“Here,” said Hannibal simply, passing Will the plate of fruit and cheese. “Eat something. And then explain to me why you look so ill. Besides the obvious fact that you don’t feed yourself.”

Will snorted at that, but he plucked a few apple slices from the tray. “Did somebody bring you a gift basket?” he asked between bites.

“No. I simply prefer not to eat garbage, and there is nothing but vending machines and fast food for miles.”

Will laughed outright, and looked a little less nauseous. “You’re something else,” he muttered. “But this is delicious. Thank you.”

Hannibal merely nodded in reply, and looked at Will expectantly. Will opened his mouth to speak.

An assertive knock split the silence.

Hannibal glanced at his watch; no students were due for quite some time. He extracted himself from his desk chair and opened the door, mentally bemoaning the lack of peepholes in the studio doors.

He opened the door and lamented twice as forcefully, adding deadbolts to the list of improvements his studio needed. Standing in front of him, wearing six-inch heels and a shark’s grin, was Freddie Lounds.

“Dr. Lecter,” she said, smooth as cheap velvet. “You haven’t been answering my emails.”

Will must have made the mistake of turning around and meeting her eyes, because her smile increased in overall wattage. “Hello there,” she greeted enthusiastically, gracefully barreling through the door in the way that only she could. “Freddie Lounds, music publisher and agent of select classical artists. Who might you be?”

“Will Graham,” he replied, standing to shake her swiftly offered hand. The leather of her glove squeaked as he gripped it. The gloves were the same grating red as her short skirt and patterned coat, which almost matched the shade of her spiral curls. The combined effect made her look like an open wound in Hannibal’s studio.

He’d always wondered if her half-crazed sense of style was meant as camouflage for the terrible deals she offered as both publisher and agent. Colorful plumage that distracted the prey from the razor-sharp talons.

But thinking of Freddie Lounds as an apex predator was giving her far too much credit.

“How can I help you, Ms. Lounds?” he asked sharply, eager to extract her from his studio, but unwilling to stoop to outright rudeness.

Freddie didn't seem to hear him. She was still grasping Will's hand like a fishhook snagging a very unfortunate fish. "Will Graham," she repeated. "Where do I know you from? Will Graham…" Her eyes lit up and her grin, impossibly, widened.

"Oh yes, I remember…I was there, the night of your last concert. You collapsed onstage."

Will dropped her hand like it was a red leather flame.

"You were very good," she placated. "In fact, I tried to find you afterward, to interest you in a recording deal. You were such an expressive performer."

"'Were' being the operative word," Will said, blank and expressionless now. Hannibal could still feel the distress leaking from him like ambient heat. "Well, I'm glad you enjoyed the concert."

"And then I heard you were institutionalized," Freddie continued. "I tried hard to find out where, so I could get you that recording contract. Never could find you."

"People generally go to institutions to get away from people, Ms. Lounds," Will said, a sharp edge creeping into his tone.

Freddie ignored it. "It was romantic, really, the tormented artist, carried off to a mental asylum," she remarked in an introspective tone.

"It was a hospital," Will corrected sharply. "Of the everyday variety. Because I wasn't mentally ill, I was physically sick and didn't know it." He looked gray and nauseous again, and he wouldn't meet Hannibal's eye over Freddie's shoulder.

"Hm," she said, eyeing Will with interest. "You should stick with the mental story. It will sell better. That angle worked wonders for Schumann."

"After he died in an asylum," Will muttered.

Freddie only shrugged. "Take a lesson from the greats." When Will seemed non-responsive to both sarcasm and guile, Freddie subsided. "Well, here's my card if you decide you're interested. As for you, Dr. Lecter —" She rounded on him suddenly and pinned him with her gaze. "I heard you're working on something new. When are you going to sell me the rights?"

Hannibal had had quite enough of Freddie Lounds for one lifetime. This was usually the moment when he politely ejected her from his studio and asked her not to come back, but he glanced at the lingering distress on Will's face and something turned hot and dangerous inside his chest.

"Ms. Lounds," he said, his cold tone the very opposite of the fire chewing behind his breastbone. "The only thing I will compose for you is a requiem mass."

"Finally coming to your senses about how much money I can offer you —"

"For your own funeral, only to be performed upon your death. It will be somewhat unconventional, I'm afraid. Written entirely in a major key. The text will be quite unorthodox.

I'm thinking of repetitions of a single word, in fact. ‘Hallelujah.’”

Freddie blinked at him. After a tense moment, she smiled in her sharp, cynical way, but seemed more amused than distressed. “You know, I think that's the most creative rejection I've ever heard.”

Her eyes flicked to Will, who was trying not to laugh and failing noticeably. He collected himself and shrugged.

“It's not smart to piss off a guy who composes for a living,” he offered, not even slightly apologetic. He grinned at Hannibal when Freddie turned away. Hannibal was relieved to see the color returning to his face.

"Musicians," Freddie sighed. “You think you're all God's gift to humanity. But the longer I work with the lot of you, the more I'm convinced you're just a bunch of under-socialized bastards.”

She plucked her sunglasses from the designer purse at her side and pointed with them for emphasis. “I have your answer for today. But think about it, boys. We could make beautiful music together. And the money wouldn't be so bad either.”

Will and Hannibal watched Freddie march through the door on her impossibly high heels. She didn’t wobble even once as she turned to disappear into the hallway. They listened to the click of her heels under it faded into silence.

Not for the first time, Hannibal was grateful that he had used his own name and not the Pariah pseudonym when dealing with Ms. Lounds. At least his best work was safe from her clutches.

“It was encephalitis,” Will murmured behind him. “I was very sick. That concert was supposed to be my path to the big leagues, and I didn’t know what was wrong…” He paused to swallow. “Pianists, we’re supposed to keep going no matter what. Sick or well or whatever. So I did. I barely remember that night, except for the burning heat, waking up in the hospital…” He sighed heavily. “So, no, I’m not up to performing. Not yet. Maybe not ever again.”

Hannibal nodded, his mind sifting through the sudden wealth of information about Will. He hadn’t yet decided how to respond when, apropos of nothing, Will snorted.

“Under-socialized bastards,” he said. “You know, she's not wrong about that.”

Chapter End Notes

In this chapter, I discovered that Abigail and Freddie are both a lot of fun to write. ;) Also, Freddie the sleazy music publisher is TOO MUCH FUN as a concept. For me, anyway. Hopefully for you, too.

As for Hannibal and Will, writing them as two musicians with the same, weird taste in music is also too much fun.

Let me know if you enjoyed! And thanks to everyone who left a comment. It means the world to me that we're all enjoying musical!Hannigram together. And here I was, thinking that this AU was ill-advised and maybe too boring! Thanks for the comments and kudos. :)

Chapter 3

Chapter Notes

See the end of the chapter for notes

Abigail was unpredictable. She very rarely made musical decisions with any level of orthodoxy, and Hannibal found it utterly charming. Her tendency to stop in the midst of playing to pursue conversation was no less charming, if slightly less desirable.

“A woman named Freddie Lounds wants me to sign a recording contract,” she said one day, her fingers halting in the midst of the melancholy waltz they’d been working on.

Composure was always within easy reach for Hannibal, but he did occasionally feel strained by maintaining it. He kept his face smooth when he raised his eyes to hers, a tremor of effort running under his skin. “Oh?” he asked, as though she’d merely remarked on the color of his tie.

“She offered me a deal.” Abigail was very direct and not easily embarrassed, but she fidgeted a little under his gaze. “I’m thinking about it.”

Hannibal closed his notebook on the copious notes he’d been keeping about his work with Abigail and clasped his fingers over the binding. “What do you know about Freddie Lounds?” he asked evenly.

“I know that she’s not exactly scrupulous,” Abigail acknowledged. “But I also know that I need the money. Conservatories aren’t cheap.”

“Certainly not,” Hannibal agreed. He studied her face for a moment, trying to divine whether she was looking for advice or his blessing — or for nothing at all. There was something tremulous and hesitant in the twitch of her lip, something that hinted at insecurity. Hannibal decided to hazard his advice. “It’s your decision, Abigail. But I would advise you not to sign anything until you’ve discussed this further with both Will and myself.”

Abigail nodded and turned back to the piano. Hannibal thought the set of her shoulders seemed more relaxed than a moment before.

“I played this waltz for Will,” she said, resting her fingers lightly against the keys. A rueful smile bloomed across her face like a stain. “He didn't like it.”

“He told you he didn't like it?”

“He was nice about it. Said something meaningless about liking my use of color. But I could tell it rubbed him the wrong way — he makes a certain face when music grates at him. And he corrected my technique in the octaves passage.”

From what Hannibal could tell, Abigail and Will had the oddest incidents of miscommunication. Will adored Abigail and loved her compositions. But he didn’t share her

taste for the musically macabre.

“His taste may differ from yours and mine,” he answered, applying balm to the wound. “But I know for a fact that he admires your writing.”

It was apparently the right approach to take; Abigail all but beamed at his words. Hannibal thought it wise to ground her before too much praise swelled her head and carried her away. “He’s not wrong about your technique, however,” he continued. “Don't break the line of your wrist.” He adjusted her wrist just slightly and gestured for her to play the passage in question, dividing his attention between watching her progress and tucking away his irritation over Freddie Lounds’ interference for a more actionable moment.

Abigail looked to him when she reached a cadence point, and he rewarded her with a crisp nod. “Like that, yes. Again.”

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“Can I play it just one more time?”

Will wasn’t sure why the child had even bothered to ask, since he was already well into the first phrase of *Old MacDonald*.

“Sure,” he said, redundantly, and repressed both a smile and a sigh as he walked to the door. A quick glance into the hallway revealed that Bobby’s aunt was late to pick him up again. Will’s irritation was distant; the aunt was part of the Baltimore Symphony Orchestra, and he knew better than most just how difficult it could be to rush from rehearsals to other appointments. At least today her lateness wouldn’t put him out. Abigail would usually be up next in his schedule, but she’d come earlier in the day.

Will’s thoughts darkened as he thought back on her reason for the rescheduling. She’d wanted to talk. *Freddie Lounds wants me to sign a recording contract…*

Not responding with, “Over my cold dead body,” had taken an effort. Will shook off the memory, casting a longing glance at Hannibal’s closed door. He needed to discuss this with him. If anyone stood a chance of talking sense into Abigail, it was Hannibal.

The sound of gleeful banging startled Will out of his reverie and he turned to find Bobby bouncing his fingers against the keys at random. Ah, childhood.

He left the door open for Bobby’s aunt and dropped himself on the piano bench beside the six-year-old who was having too much fun creating chaos.

“Show me your song one more time,” he asked, waiting as Bobby painstakingly picked out the five keys he would need. “Curve your fingers,” Will prompted, and Bobby obliged. His final rendition of *Old MacDonald* featured lopsided rhythm, questionable dynamics, and fingers that went a little flat by the end, but Will detected progress and decided to call it a victory. “Good job,” he declared. Bobby smiled and wiggled off the edge of the bench to grab the canvas bag for his music books.

“Who’s that?” he asked, pointing to the doorway before wrangling his books into his bag.

Will turned to find Hannibal waiting in the doorway. “That’s another teacher,” Will explained absently, already moving toward the door. “Finish putting your books away. Your aunt should be here any minute. I need to talk to you,” he added when he was beside Hannibal.

“And I need to speak with you,” Hannibal replied, looking between Will and Bobby with something like amusement.

Will heard Bobby’s aunt approaching long before he saw her. “Sorry, sorry, sorry,” she was already saying as she burst out of the stairwell and power-walked down the hall. Her long black hair looked almost wind-blown with her speed. “Rehearsals. Bloom is a great conductor, but I’ll be damned if she doesn’t run the rehearsals late all the time.”

“Aunt Bev,” Bobby said in a scandalized hush. “You said a *bad word.*”

She glanced at Bobby, took in his wide-eyed expression, and winced. “I mean I’ll be darned,” she corrected, breezing past Will, Hannibal, and Bobby’s disapproval. “You ready, kid?”

“Yeah,” Bobby said, shouldering his bag. “Bye, Mr. Graham.”

“Bye, Bobby,” he answered, making room for the two Katzes to leave side by side. Hannibal stepped into the studio once they were safely away.

“Aunt Bev?” Bobby’s voice carried down the hall as Will started to shut the door.

“Yeah, squirt?”

“I’m hungry.”

Beverly’s groan was cut off when Will pushed the door shut and leaned against it.

“I hope you’re not here to complain about hearing *Old MacDonald* and *Merrily We Roll Along* a hundred times today. Because believe me, if there was a way around it…” he trailed off with a tired grin. He was aware that he was stalling on having a difficult conversation, but he was too tired to quite care.

Thankfully, Hannibal saved him the trouble of raising the topic himself.

“Freddie Lounds has approached Abigail,” he said, cooler than Will had been when he first heard the news.

Will scrubbed a hand over his face and felt the tired feeling soak past his skin almost to his bones. “Yeah,” he muttered. “What are we going to do about that?”

“We could forbid her to do it,” Hannibal said in a dry tone. “But I think that might prove counterproductive.”

When Will laughed, it came out as a despairing huff. “She tell you why she’s thinking about signing a deal with the devil?”

“The same reason most people bargain away things they should not,” Hannibal replied. “For money.”

“The sad thing is that I can’t even blame her. Being a student is hard. Especially if you also want to eat.” Will crossed the studio and dropped himself into the chair by the desk. The sun streaked through the window, warming his left shoulder. He gestured at the chair beside the piano. “Have a seat, if you want.”

Hannibal pulled the chair close in front of Will’s before settling into it. The sunlight glinted silver and gold in his hair. “You’re sure it’s only a question of money?” he asked, his eyes distant and thoughtful. His eyes, Will noticed suddenly, looked different in the sun. A warm brown instead of nearly black.

“Uh,” he started, pulling himself back to the issue at hand. “Yeah.”

Hannibal nodded, and something in his suddenly decisive posture reminded Will of rapid-setting cement. Solid and foundational.

“If the current parameters are hampering her ability to learn and thrive, then we will change them,” he stated, matter-of-fact.

Will blinked at him.

“I will teach her free of charge, if necessary,” Hannibal translated, noting Will’s furrowed look.

“I can’t let you do that. Not alone, anyway. If we both lower our fees —“

Hannibal raised a staying hand. “I insist, Will. To be quite frank, I don’t need the income. I suspect you do.”

Will really couldn’t argue with facts, however much he hated them. He nodded mutely. The thought of Jack’s disapproving scowl motivated him to find his voice again.

“Jack might not like it,” he said. “I’m not sure he allows scholarship students.”

Hannibal was completely unmoved. “Jack doesn’t have to know.”

Will swallowed hard and nodded. “Alright. But if I get fired for this, I’m blaming you.”

Hannibal gave a faint smile as he stood and leaned close to clasp a hand over Will’s shoulder in solidarity. “I wouldn’t have it any other way,” he said, and released him.

===

“What?” Abigail asked. It was a reflexive response, her mouth working before her brain could quite catch up. Her fingers gripped the hard edge of Will’s piano bench. Will was seated at his desk, his chair swiveled in her direction, his fingers woven loosely together and dangling over his knees as he leaned forward. It was a mostly relaxed posture, but she’d gotten good at reading him over their weeks of lessons together. He was tense.

Hannibal projected nothing but calm from where he stood, glancing between them.

“If money’s a problem for you,” Will repeated with no hint of irritation or condescension, “Then we’ll cut our fees.”

“I will be teaching you as a scholarship student,” Hannibal added. Something flashed between the two of them, an uneasy look from Will that Hannibal absorbed with calm confidence. Will sighed.

Abigail had given up on trying to interpret their wordless conversations. She was very good with reading people, but this was a language she couldn’t seem to speak. It didn’t worry her, though; whatever was causing Will’s hesitation had nothing to do with her. She knew it the instant he brought out his real smile.

“Will that be enough?” Will asked.

Abigail wanted to nod and politely say “thank you.” She wanted to go back to Hannibal’s studio for a composition lesson and be distantly grateful that she wouldn’t have to be Freddie Lounds’ packhorse for all things musical. She wanted to smile and be gracious and glad.

Instead, she felt the kindness like the sting of salt against broken skin, a stinging that seemed to be gathering behind her eyes. “I…” she managed, but her voice broke without warning and her face cracked, and suddenly she was crying.

“Hey, hey…” Will murmured, and gingerly laid a hand on her arm. “You okay?”

She hugged him before she had the chance to decide whether or not it was appropriate, nodding against his shoulder. “Yeah. Yeah, I’m fine.”

Will was rigid at first, but he relaxed after a moment and patted her back.

She pulled back and swiped at her face before turning to face Hannibal. He opened his arms to her with a faint smile. Without a moment’s hesitation, she hugged him, too. “Thank you,” she murmured against his chest.

“You have so much potential, Abigail,” he answered. “You deserve every chance to succeed.”

She’d never known anyone who had as much faith in her as Will and Hannibal had just demonstrated. Abigail resolved to do everything in her power to make them proud.

“Okay,” she said, stepping back, and pulling in a deep breath. “I guess I have a lot of practicing to do.” She glanced at Hannibal. “We should get on that.”

His smile was pleased. “We should,” he agreed. “Did you decide which of your pieces you would like to include in the recital?”

“Still thinking. What about you?” she countered, arcing an eyebrow at him. “What are you going to premiere? Or is Will going to do the playing?”

Something flickered across Will's face and he opened his mouth to speak, but Hannibal headed him off. "I'll be playing. This time." He met Will's gaze evenly.

It was their unspoken language again, but Abigail didn't mind it. She was just glad that she had the two of them.

===

Hannibal's piano concerto was a disaster.

He'd barely progressed past the stage of sketching melodic fragments and outlining potential harmonies since he'd first heard the whisper of inspiration in his mind. He was never this slow when it came to putting music to paper. He never struggled with his pieces for more than a few days.

So what was wrong?

He glared at the melody taunting him from the mostly-blank page of staff paper, his pencil dangling uselessly from his fingers. The phrases bounced in his mind like echoes, growing fainter and more muddled with each repetition. What was missing?

Threading the fingers of his free hand through his hair with a growl, he resisted the urge to stand and pace. He forced himself to go inward instead, searching for whatever was eluding him. His eyes slipped shut and he *listened*.

His mind was implacably silent. All he could hear was the faint sound of Will's piano next door. It wasn't a student playing, of that Hannibal was certain. He'd know Will's warm but plaintive tone anywhere. Like a brightly lit house in a shadowy field. A distant glimmer of stars or fireflies.

Deep in the locked vaults of Hannibal's mind, something shifted, clicked — released. He wondered, suddenly, if what he was writing wasn't a concerto after all. Perhaps something for solo piano. He found himself considering what might suit Will's tone, his technique and mood and exquisite expression.

His pencil was moving again, quicker than thought. He barely touched the piano, because he could *hear* it.

I'm not up to performing. Not yet. Maybe not ever again, Will's voice protested in Hannibal's mind. It slowed the flow of notes for a moment, but didn't halt them. Not even good sense could stop the intoxicating flood of ideas. If he was writing for a dream that would never be realized, then so be it.

He wrote for hours without stopping to eat or consider or doubt, pausing only to sharpen the pencil and scratch a single word in the upper right corner of the first page: *Will.*

He wasn't sure whether he meant it as an inspiration or a dedication or neither or both at once, but he didn't stop to question himself. Hannibal penciled in a penultimate cadence, a

respite that was only a breathless, hanging moment before the final plunge. He slid a fresh sheet of paper in front of him.

And stopped.

The ending, he thought, half-frantic. What was the ending?

In his echoing thoughts, he tried to compress the branching phrases into something conclusive and summary, something that would evoke that vibrant image of the glowing house and the warmth and the fireflies. But with each try, the music twisted away from him and rebelled, swelling too grand and defiant to be contained.

Wrong, he thought, again and again, the word outlined so clearly in his mind that it might as well have been written across the page. *Something's wrong.*

He spread the pages carefully in front of him, glanced over them once, and then played what he'd written with an almost vengeful energy. The empty page at the end felt like falling over the edge of a cliff.

What was he missing?

===

Hannibal didn't often play the pianos in his studio. The sounds that made their way to Will's side of the wall were generated by students, more often than not. Will was sure that he'd never heard Hannibal play one of his own compositions. Even when Hannibal was in the act of composing, Will only ever heard snatches of ideas, all incomplete. Sentences left dangling and unpunctuated. It was unintelligible.

And yet he recognized Hannibal's work the moment it began to filter through their wall in earnest. It was after hours and the hallway was dark when he was drawn to Hannibal's door by the sounds within. There he paused, held back only by the terrible thought of interrupting something so striking. In Hannibal's notes he heard a warm, electric dark, like the night air full of sparking energy before a lightning storm. He heard distant lights and gleaming stars and mist and shadows all knit together into something simultaneously frightening and comforting. Will thought of the feeling he'd always had when his house was a beacon of light across the darkened fields. Light gleaming brighter because of the surrounding darkness, the precious sense of safety intensified by the pressing gloom all around. In music and in life — if there was even a definable difference between those things — safety and fear were not always mutually exclusive.

He heard something else in the notes behind Hannibal's door. Something familiar and disorienting all at once, like a well-loved photo rendered in all the wrong colors.

Inside, Hannibal fell abruptly into a silence that felt stifled and frustrated, even from this distance. Will's mind almost itched with that undefinable familiarity.

All at once, he *realized*.

The door opened with no warning.

===

Will was standing outside Hannibal's door, all but gaping at him.

"Good eve—" Hannibal began.

"You're…you're *him*," Will interrupted. "You let me drool all over Pariah's — *your* — work all this time. The music, I heard the music," he gestured faintly at the piano and the papers still scattered there. "It's you." His jaw went from slack with shock to clenched and angry; his eyes snapped up to Hannibal's. "Why didn't you tell me?"

"It's not something I have ever related to anyone outside of absolute necessity," Hannibal explained, wondering why he felt so desperate that Will should understand and not feel hurt. "Although in your case, it seems that I didn't need to tell you at all. You simply understood."

He studied the waves of anger and understanding that seemed to be warring on Will's face and hoped the battle would go in his favor.

"It was not my intention to deceive you, Will. I didn't know I would want to tell you, at first. And then I didn't know how." Will gave him a faint nod, and his anger seemed to be giving way to surprise. Hannibal's sudden sense of relief was fleeting; he had an idea.

"I'm glad you're here, Will. I may need your help with something." He took hold of Will's shoulder and steered him into the studio, shutting the door on the shadows outside. Will seemed surprised when Hannibal gestured toward the piano bench. "Will you play this for me?" Hannibal asked. "Perhaps you can help direct me towards an ending."

Will's eyes caught on the looped letters spelling his name on the opening page, but he only nodded. He drifted toward the piano, settled on the bench.

And then he played.

The notes burst into new life under his fingertips, as though Will understood them on a deeper level than Hannibal had, even as he wrote them. As though, for all his effort and struggle, Hannibal had merely written a cipher and Will alone had the key. New meanings arose at Will's touch and Will's thought, and Hannibal was mesmerized. And then he reached the place where the notes dropped away into nothing.

But Will didn't stop. His eyes fell from the pages to the keys, and he played on. In his hands, the ending wasn't an ending at all — it was a transition. Shot through with humming light and shifting colors, a delicate, new melody was born out of the ashes of the old, soaring on shimmering chords, all of it rooted in what came before but bursting forth like a butterfly thrusting itself from a chrysalis, altered and infinitely more beautiful. The music didn't end so much as it stopped, the last ringing tones caught in the pedal. It was a story without an ending, but with a promise of something over the horizon.

Hannibal couldn't speak.

This was the finale he's been looking for and he'd never known it until this very moment.

He scribbled madly inside his head, recording Will's beautiful mesh of chords and his varied melody, too focused to speak.

Will sighed and shook his head. “I’m sorry. I shouldn't have changed it so much. I had an idea, and I got carried away. My problem has always been too much imagination.”

Hannibal blinked away the notes dancing behind his eyes, and seized a blank page to transfer them there instead.

“You should never apologize for your gifts,” he said, splitting his attention between speaking and feverishly scratching Will’s notes onto the page before him. “And especially not for imagination.” They fell into silence as Hannibal finished transferring the glorious sounds from his memory to the page. At last, he let the page rest on the piano again, feeling drained and dazed and energized in the way that only great music could accomplish. “I thought you weren't a composer,” he remarked to Will, a statement tucked into the question.

“I'm not,” Will answered with a shrug. “You are.” Something like mischief entered his eyes, and he smiled. “But improvisation — that I can do.”

“You composed this ending,” Hannibal pressed, staring at the pages where his notes and Will’s blurred together.

“It was there already,” Will said. “I just found it.”

Hannibal gathered the pages together and set them carefully to one side of the piano. Will made room for him on the bench, and they sat in silence.

“I’ll credit you on this composition, of course,” Hannibal said at last. “Would you like to work under your own name or a pseudonym?”

“I’ll give it some thought,” Will replied. “But there is one thing I’d like to settle immediately. I’ll perform in the recital we’re planning for Abigail.” He paused to meet Hannibal’s eyes. “On one condition.”

Hannibal waited breathlessly. It seemed to be the only action he was capable of where Will was concerned.

“If you’ll let me premiere this piece,” Will finished, looking faintly uneasy. As though he was worried that he might have overstepped his bounds.

As if it could possibly be in Hannibal’s power to deny him this.

“Anything you want.” It wasn’t a surrender at all, in Hannibal’s mind. It was the greatest victory. Will smiled at him and leaned forward to shift the pages back onto the music stand in front of him. He played the beginning, slow and considering.

“This really is a great melody,” Will remarked, and played on.

Hannibal's eyes drifted from Will's face to the opening measures of their piece to his own handwriting adorning the page.

Will, the inspiration and maybe-dedication written in the corner. Only now Hannibal was certain that it wasn't a dedication after all.

It was the title.

Chapter End Notes

The scene in which Will and Hannibal tell Abigail that they're going to ease her financial burden through scholarships is near and dear to my heart for two reasons. 1) I had a teacher that did something similar for me, once, and I couldn't have gone on to get a music degree without that act of kindness. We owe so much to our teachers. Ugh, I'm getting emotional just thinking about it. 2) I had a swell of Murder Family feels, and it felt so good to write something between Will, Hannibal, and Abigail that was faintly familial and wasn't stained by tragedy. Every time I see anything Murder Family-related, I think of ghost!Abigail's dialogue about other worlds having happier possibilities and hopefully being kinder to her. It was amazing to visit one of those other, kinder worlds in this AU.

Overall, I had way too much fun writing music teacher!Hannigram. Thank you to everyone who commented and left kudos and read. I'm so glad we could have this weird and wonderful AU journey together. ;) Music + Hannigram seems to be my modus operandi…and, all things considered, I think I'm okay with that.

Let me know if you enjoyed the final chapter! <3

End Notes

Disclaimer: none of Hannibal's disparaging thoughts are my own. Hannibal's thoughts about Jack being a tuba player were mean, mean, SO MEAN, HANNIBAL. I actually got a little distressed at the thought of Hannibal being a piano/composition teacher, because he has no qualms about people's feelings and very specific ideas of who and what has value. Anyone with normal levels of musical ability wouldn't really be worth his time, in his mind. As somebody who works with all ages and levels of accomplishment, and who sees great value and potential in everyone's musical efforts, it bothered me deeply to write from the perspective of someone who does *not* see or value these things. So just know that Hannibal is a jerkface who should never teach music. I made myself feel a little better when I decided that Hannibal doesn't teach children, and that he usually only accepts students who have striking talent. So nobody is getting crapped on. Well, except Franklyn. But he's too infatuated to notice, so he's fine. ;)

As for Hannibal's pseudonym, C.P. Pariah, I decided to get cute and make it an anagram for "Chesapeake Ripper." But it's abbreviated, because the only part of the anagram that makes sense is "Pariah." So it's lame and clever at the same time, I think. Kind of like Hannibal with all his terrible puns. ;) One other thing that influenced me in choosing this name for him to compose under was that fact that when Jack first meets Hannibal, he speaks with admiration about Hannibal's paper, Evolutionary Origins of Social Exclusion. Social exclusion is a large part of the definition of being a pariah. *racks us coolness points* *immediately loses all coolness points because I have written an actual piano teacher AU*

Poor, socially excluded Hannibal. My desire to hug him and my desire to slap him are just about equal. Sad, lonely Hannibal! WHO IS A LITERAL CANNIBAL AND KILLS PEOPLE FOR KICKS. Thankfully, in this music!AU, Hannibal is *not* a cannibal, so I can breathe a sigh of moral relief on that front. He is, however, still a pretentious jerk. (Which makes him a perfect candidate for a career in the world of music performance and academia, hahaha… I'm joking. Mostly.)

Do Hannibal and Will make good musicians? Is this the worst AU you've ever read?? Let me know. ;)

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